Ars signorum - FrathWiki

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Ars signorum	
Spoken in:	--
Timeline/Universe:	international auxiliary language
Total speakers:	probably, none
Genealogical classification:	a priori philosophical language
Basic word order:	SVO
Morphological type:	agglutinating
Morphosyntactic alignment:	accusative
Created by:	
George Dalgarno	1661

Ars signorum (Latin: *The Art of Signs*) is a philosophical language published by George Dalgarno, a Scottish-born Oxford schoolmaster, in 1661. It is one of the first known languages of this kind. Dalgarno initially cooperated with John Wilkins, but the two could not agree on a taxonomy, as Wilkins aimed at an encyclopedic taxonomy covering every species of animals, plants, minerals and artifcats, while Dalgarno opted for a taxonomy covering only generic notions, from which more specific words could be formed by compounding. Hence, they parted company and Dalgarno pursued his own ideas. Wilkins would go on to design An Essay towards a Real Character, which he published in 1668.

Ars signorum is also the title of the book in which Dalgarno lays out the language. The book is written in Latin and focuses on the philosophical considerations behind the design of his language, to the point that it fails to give a coherent description of the language's grammar. But at least, it contains some sample texts (translations from the Bible and Æesop's fables), a fold-out chart of the taxonomy and the word roots derived from it, and a Latin dictionary of the language. This almost complete absence of the kind of information that a language learner would want certainly was part of the reason why the language apparently was not learned by anyone and thus was a dead language from the start.

Phonology

Dalgarno devotes nine pages of his book to the phonology of his language, discussing phonetic features and the reasoning behind his choices of phonemes.

Consonants

		Labial	Coronal	Dorsal
Stops	**voiceless**	p	t	k
	voiced	b	d	g
Fricatives	**voiceless**	f	s	
	voiced	v		
Nasals		m	n	
Liquids			l r	

An uncertain matter is the combination **sh**, which Dalgarno uses as a "euphonious" substitute for **sr**. The letter **h** is not used otherwise in the language, and it is uncertain whether the combination is pronounced as [s]+[h], or, as in English, as [ʃ].

Vowels

	"Guttural"	"Labial"
Close	i	u
Close-mid	e	o <ʊ>
Open-mid	ɛ <ɳ>	ɔ <o>
Open	a	

In addition, the language uses the diphthongs **ai**, **ei** and **oi**.

Morphology

Word formation

Words in Ars signorum are formed by derivation and compounding from a set of 1068 monosyllabic roots ("Radicals"). These roots denote generic concepts and are derived from a taxonomy of ideas. The classes indicated by the initial phoneme are:

- **A** being.
- **H** substance.
- **E** accident.
- **I** complete (concrete) being.
- **O** body.
- **Y** spirit.
- **U** composite of body and spirit: person.
- **M** mathematical concrete.
- **N** physical concrete.

- **F** artificial concrete.
- **Ai** spiritual concrete.
- **El** soul.
- **Oi** angel.
- **S** common accident.
- **B** mathematical accident.
- **D** physical accident.
- **G** sensitive quality.
- **P** sensitive accident.
- **T** rational accident.
- **K** political accident.

The vowel-initial categories contain just one word each, formed from the vowel and the consonant **v**, e.g. **uv** 'human being'. The others combine with a vowel and a consonant to form roots. Herein, the diphthong **ei** functions as placeholder for a vowel and the consonant **s** as placeholder for a consonant, such that, for instance, the word **neis** refers to a generic "physical concrete".

In the "Table of Substances" (roots beginning with **m**, **n**, **f**), the final consonant indicates the first-level subdivision and the vowel the second-level subdivision. In the "Table of Accidents" (roots beginning with **s** or a stop), the vowel indicates the first-level subdivision and the final consonant the second-level subdivision. The opposite of an accident is formed by infixing **r** after the first consonant (e.g., **gom** 'light'; **grom** 'darkness'); the middle element between the opposites by infixing **l** (**glom** 'twilight'). (After **s**, **h** is used instead of **r**). A prefixed **s** is sometimes used to create more roots in a particular class.

Example of root formation:

neik	terrestrial animal
nak	oviparous (e.g., lizard)
nŋk	whole-footed (e.g., horse, elephant)
nek	split-footed (e.g., cattle, pig)
nik	multiple-toed, large (e.g., dog)
nok	multiple-toed, small (e.g., mouse)
nuk	burrowing (e.g., mole)
nuk	serpent

There are several derivational suffixes, e.g. **-el** for an agent noun: **kan** 'to rule'; **kanel** 'king'; **-or** for an object noun: **pon** 'love'; **ponor** 'something or somebody being loved'.

Many more words can be formed by compounding. Compounds are head-initial, and can consist of two or more roots. Example:

nafgrofnŋm 'coal' ('mineral'+'black'+'fire'; i.e. 'black mineral that burns')

Nouns

Nouns are not inflected for case. The plural is formed by doubling the final consonant and adding **i**: **kanel** 'king'; **kanelli** 'kings'.

Adjectives

There are many suffixes for the degree of quality of an adjective.

sim**am**	very good
sim**an**	moderately good
sim**af**	not very good
sim**ab**	better
sim	as good
sim**ag**	less good
sim**ap**	best
sim**at**	moderately good
sim**ak**	least good

Pronouns

	Singular	**Plural**
1st person	lal	lalli
2nd person	lŋl	lŋlli
3rd person	lel	lelli
Proximal	lol	lolli
Distal	lul	lulli
Interrogative	lul	lulli

Numerals

Numerals begin with **v** followed by a string of vowels and consonants functioning as digits.

Digit	Vowel	Consonant
0	i	l
1	a	m
2	ŋ	n
3	e	f
4	o	b
5	u	d
6	u	g
7	ai	p
8	ei	t
9	oi	k

Examples: **vado** '154'; **ventum** '32861'.

Verbs

Verbs have five tenses, an imperative and an infinitive.

Example: **ponesu** 'to love'

Present	pon**esi**
Imperfect	pon**ese**
Perfect	pon**esa**
Pluperfect	pon**esŋ**
Future	pon**esu**
Imperative	pon**eso**
Infinitive	pon**esu**

Syntax

The basic word order is SVO; attributes follow the noun they modify.

Sample text

Dan semu, Sava samesa Nam tŋn Nom. Tŋn nom avesa sof-shana tŋn draga, tŋn gromu avesa ben mem sŋf bafu: tŋn uv sŋf Sava damesa ben mem sŋf nimmi.

'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.' (Genesis 1:1-2)

Literature

Cram, D.; Maat, J. 2001. *George Dalgarno on Universal Language*. Oxford University Press. Contains a complete edition and translation of *Ars signorum* and other works by George Dalgarno.

This article is part of a series on Engineered languages.

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